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ABSTRACT

English instructors must discover methods that inspire culturally diverse university students to utilize intelligent reading strategies, even when students feel like inferior outcasts. A class was designed at the University of Alaska to teach reading strategies. The typical class consisted of 20-25 students ranging in age from 18 to 60 and representing a broad cultural and ethnic spectrum. The initial assignment is the composition of a reading autobiography in which the students describe their experiences with reading in the past. Examples of the thoughts and emotions from student writing and journals demonstrate a changing attitude toward reading over the course of time. Racism, which is common to many ethnic groups, may be evoked in the student writings by certain kinds of reading assignments. It remains common to encounter students who profess to hate reading, especially when they have felt marginalized or have been humiliated by teachers. This makes the fostering of a "safe" classroom environment of paramount importance. Students must be assured that the instructor has faith in each individual. Many students, as experience has shown, only need minimal encouragement to become avid readers. These techniques are not just relevant to a culturally diverse region like Alaska. The medium of literature provides a useful site for the alleviation of some of the general bigotry, violence and pain common to all facets of society. (HB)

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AFFIRMING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS WITH A LITERATURE OF THEIR OWN

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AFFIRMING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS WITH A LITERATURE OF THEIR OWN

Though I was born and raised in the hills of East Tennessee, it was not until I was 48 years old, and a graduate student at the University of Alaska Anchorage, that I discovered Southern Appalachian literature. This delayed discovery of books to which I could relate was hardly the result of a dearth of reading--I have, for as long as I can remember, read at least one book per day. Nor was it because of a lack of information on mountain folk, for anthropologists, educators, missionaries, sociologists, and politicians have written about our people for decades. Until recently, however, these writers were exclusively outsiders, and the stereotypical images they conveyed have left many Americans--even the most educated--with negative perceptions of our people.

Because of my own experience with feelings of isolation and humiliation in college classrooms, I was at first very cautious, then overjoyed, when Dr. Arlene Kuhner, Chair of the English Department at the University of Alaska Anchorage, encouraged me to speak out in graduate classes. To my surprise, here was a professor who seemed perfectly comfortable with the dual roles of learner/teacher, and her obvious respect for the opinions of her students inspired us to believe in ourselves. Dr. Kuhner's interest in Appalachian culture and literature had a profound effect upon my self-confidence, and my standing before you as a member of the teaching profession today is a direct result of the genuine concern shown by one English professor.

How does a Cherokee/Appalachian woman from Tennessee meet the challenge of inspiring culturally diverse university students in Alaska to begin utilizing intelligent reading strategies--especially when many of those students have, not only internalized feelings of their own "inferiority," but also some rather shocking ideas of who I, a "hillbilly woman," am? During the next few moments, I would like to share some of the teaching techniques I have used in my classes at UAA, and some responses to the literature we have studied; but first, a bit about my students:

A typical class in Reading Strategies (ENGL 105) consists of 20-25 students, ranging in age from 18 to 60, and representing a broad spectrum of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The first class of each semester is a special challenge, for I am greeted by a roomful of silent, unsmiling students whose only bond with each other seems to be their common dislike for reading. Feeling somewhat vulnerable in the face of such misery, I begin, nevertheless, by telling of my own struggle to obtain an education. Then I ask each student to state his/her name and home state, country or Alaskan village, and I observe as an almost palpable sense of relief seems to replace the tension noted earlier. Each of us, it becomes apparent, is a "minority," and every one of us, including the instructor, has an "accent!"

Now we can discuss more honestly their aversion to reading, and I make the first assignment: a "Reading Autobiography,"

three to five pages in length. Perhaps as you listen to excerpts from the lives of my students, you will hear some familiar voices....

Martha, a Yupik woman from the Kuskokwim Bay area of Western Alaska, writes of the animosity she harbors for white people and their books as a result of having been punished by teachers and missionaries for speaking her own language in school. She is taking this class only as a necessary step in pursuing a degree.

A few weeks later, however, Martha's journal reflects a change of attitude and a visceral response to a reading assignment--not a work authored by an Alaska Native, but a poem by Walter McDonald, entitled "Never in My Life." Though McDonald's poem explores communication difficulties between an adult son and his dying father, Martha relates it to an experience in her own life in which she and her children were rescued from a burning house. Resorting to poetic form herself, she begins her journal:

> Never in my life
> Have I repaid Bobby Lee....

And after vivid narration describing the explosion of ammunition within an "Arctic inferno," the "roof lifting off in a February snow," the panic of searching for loved ones, and finally the joyous reunion of victims and rescuers, Martha concludes:

Bobby Lee is a musher,
Could use a warm hat--

Yet, where do I find time
to stitch together
a warm token of my gratitude?

For her book review, Martha read Tisha by Robert Specht, and she admitted tearfully in class that she had never realized there were any whites like teacher Ann Purdy (the subject of Specht's biography) who genuinely cared about Alaska Natives.

Nineteen-year-old Konstantin wrote in his autobiography of long months away from his family in Russia as he toured the country with his ski team. He confided that his feelings of isolation were intensified when one of his teammates became ill and died suddenly, and that here in America, he was resentful of being further isolated, because he "must always sit with the dictionary, while everyone else watches football."

Konstantin was hesitant to exercise his recently-learned English in the classroom, but during a discussion of Letty Pogrebin's essay, "Can Women and Men Be Friends?" he exploded, "I don't understand American culture! If I am with a group of Russian girls (which is perfectly normal in my country), you call me a 'stud,' and if I hang out with my male friends (also very normal in Russia), Americans say, 'Oh, you must be gay!' What is wrong with this country that you must see every relationship as a sexual one?!"

As a result of Konstantin's unexpected outburst, several of his classmates began reading books on Russian culture, and

Konstantin developed an insatiable interest in American short stories.

Racism is not restricted to any particular ethnic group, and literary assignments may evoke student remarks which are not necessarily politically correct. For instance, after reading Richard Schaefer's essay, "American Indians: The Native Americans," a Korean student was quite vocal: "I don't understand all this sympathy for Indians," she said. "The only Natives I've ever seen are the drunks in downtown Anchorage, and I don't feel sorry for people who won't work or get an education or even try to better themselves."

Neither of the two Indian students in class responded to Hyon's tirade, but after class, Sandy, a Tlingit from Southeastern Alaska, quietly asked, "Hyon, would you like to know more about the history of our people?"

By the next class period, Hyon had read several poems by American Indian authors, and had begun reading an historical novel on the Tlingit. She openly apologized for her remarks in class the previous week and could hardly contain her admiration for Native American writers!

Semester after semester, I encounter students who profess to hate reading--students who because of skin color, or dialect, or poverty, or physical disability, have felt marginalized in classrooms where, in many cases, they were humiliated by teachers, as well as by peers. My first priority, therefore,

is to provide a "safe" classroom environment for these students.

My next goal is to communicate to each student my faith in him/her. I begin by writing a personal note to each student, responding to reading autobiographies and suggesting one book I think would be of special interest to this particular student. Students continually amaze me with their willingness to examine suggested titles, and the results of this "springboard action" are gratifying.

Consider Robert, for instance--a 6'5", 250-lb. freshman who had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. "My mother is a teacher, and we've always had a nice library," he remarked, "but I'm just a big, dumb football player who made it through high school on my athletic ability. I'm not even sure I should be in college, because I **hate** to read."

Two weeks later, Robert confided that he had never in his life read an entire novel, but that he was attempting to read a book by James Michener. My heart sank! How would this young man who had so little interest in reading ever struggle through one of Michener's voluminous works?! The following week, however, Robert came by my office with a Michener paperback in hand. Mrs. Carney, you **must** read this book--it's fantastic!" The name of the book? Sports.

Michener's book was, for Robert, a watershed experience, and eventually, he became fascinated with the history books in his mother's library. Soon his complaint was, "There just isn't enough time for all the reading I want to do." Today Robert is an honor student at UAA, preparing for a career as

a high school history teacher.

Many students, like Robert, need only minimal encouragement, while others seem so convinced of their inability to comprehend literature that they simply give up on formal education. One such student is Rachel, whose resistance to reading during the first several weeks of class was compounded by her refusal to write journals. Her standard excuse was, "I just don't feel anything when I read, so I have no words to write." Recently, however, I received a note from Rachel, thanking me for introducing the class to the writings of Elie Wiesel. "Do you know how it feels," she asked, "to be the only Jewish student in a class of Gentiles at Christmas time? Or to hear students and teachers making anti-Semitic remarks, never guessing that you're Jewish?"

Along with her note, Rachel enclosed an original poem which read, in part:

> At my darkest, loneliest hour of despair,
> you tap at my soul--
> soothe my withered spirits,
> with the very breath of life itself;
> a burst of energy, contagious laughter, stimulating
> thought, new creations, yet a humble vision--
> A wise teacher....

Rachel has become not only a prodigious reader, but is also utilizing her creative skills in poetry and painting, and though I would be hard-pressed to explain all the dynamics of her attitudinal changes, I can strongly empathize with Rachel's need for affirmation in the classroom.

Thus, students of every conceivable color and ethnic background (representing 14 foreign countries, 18 Alaskan villages, and 12 States in my two most recent classes) are discovering the life-changing potential of good literature. We have some very lively class discussions on works by authors as diverse as Maya Angelou and Jesse Stuart, or Maxine Hong Kingston and William Zinsser. And once their excitement for reading is ignited, these students devour Homer and Shakespeare, Austen and Eliot, just as eagerly as they have the essays, poetry, and short stories served to whet their appetites.

At this point, you may be thinking, "That's all very fine for a region as culturally diverse as Alaska, but how does any of this pertain to me or my students?" I do not mean to suggest that one must offer samplings of literature from every race and culture in order to meet the psychological, as well as the academic needs, of his/her students. Neither am I advocating the random selection of "multicultural readings" without regard to literary quality or content. I do believe, however, that, through the medium of literature, some of the bigotry and violence and pain in our society can be alleviated, and that as we teachers of English seek to affirm a growing population of culturally diverse students, we will discover the life most enriched to be our own.